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Uneasy Alliances

Bolshevik Co-optation Policy and the Case of Chechen Sheikh Ali Mitaev

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On 15 January 1923, a high-ranking Soviet delegation traveled to Urus-Martan, the biggest *aul* (village) of Chechnya. The purpose was to inform the population that the Soviet government had granted the Chechens an autonomous region (*avtonomnaia oblast*).¹ Originally, the meeting was to be held in Groznyi, which was not an administrative part of the new Chechen region, but where the newly established Revolutionary Committee (revkom), the provisional government of Chechnya, had its seat. If the larger population was to become acquainted with Soviet power, however, the news had to be conveyed outside the confines of Groznyi, a city living largely on its oil industry and inhabited mostly by Russians, to the *auls* of the Chechen populated countryside.²

The Soviet delegation was led by Anastas Mikoian, head of the Southeastern Bureau, the North Caucasus office of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party located in Rostov-on-Don. The delegation included Kliment Voroshilov, a member of the bureau and commander of the North Caucasus Military Region, as well as two of his deputies, Semen Budennyi and Mikhail Levandovskii. Also joining the Soviet delegates was Tashtemir El'darkhanov (1870–1934), one of the few indigenous Chechen Communists and head of the Chechen revkom, and several other members of the Chechen government. Although the Soviet delegates considered a journey to Chechnya a risky undertaking, they did not want to appear as a hostile power and thus refrained from bringing a military escort. They were,

¹ Chechnya was granted the status of an autonomous region by decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of 30 November 1923. See “Autonomy for the Chechens,” below.

² A. I. Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” *Iunost*, no. 3 (1967): 44–56, 51.

however, accompanied by two military bands whose musicians apparently had weapons hidden under their coats.³

Some 2,000–3,000 riders on horseback accompanied the delegates on the last section of their journey to Urus-Martan, where they were greeted by some 10,000 people, including inhabitants of Urus-Martan as well as representatives from different Chechen *auls*.⁴ The large number of village elders and religious figures among them gave the Soviet delegates a friendly welcome. After the Bolsheviks and the Chechen representatives held their speeches, the village elders managed to convince their guests not to return to Groznyi but to stay overnight.⁵ The atmosphere during the evening was festive, dances and plays were organized, and Budennyi, who according to Mikoian had already made a most favorable impression on the Chechens during his speech, successfully performed the *lezginka*, the traditional dance of the mountaineer peoples of the Caucasus.⁶

Although the meeting with the Chechens was largely harmonious, the world the Bolsheviks encountered was far from their liking. According to Voroshilov, who described his impressions in a letter to Stalin on 21 January 1923, the “Chechens were no better or worse than other mountaineers [*gortsy*],” yet they had more “mullahs, sheikhs, and other devilry [*chertovshchina*] than others—for example, the Karachai and even the Kabardian peoples,” and their “fanaticism, backwardness, and ignorance [were] extraordinary.”⁷ Voroshilov was convinced that a socialist transformation of “mullah-dominated Chechnya” would eventually become possible, but only once the Bolsheviks were able to rely on a “cadre of efficient and loyal party workers.” As long as this was not the case, he saw no other option than to cooperate with “mullahs and similar such gentlemen [*mully i prochie gospoda*].”⁸ To be sure, he also greatly disliked El’darkhanov, whom he described as a “spineless, weak-minded, stupid, and arrogant old geezer.”⁹ This attitude was typical among

³ This is reported by Budennyi in his memoirs: S. M. Budennyi, *Proidennyi put'* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1973), 3:305–6.

⁴ In his published memoirs, Mikoian indicates 2,000 riders and 10,000 people who met them in Urus-Martan: Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” 52. In his letter to Stalin of 21 January 1923, Voroshilov mentions 2,500–3,000 riders and 7,000–8,000 people who gathered in Urus-Martan. According to Voroshilov, Urus-Martan had some 30,000 inhabitants in total. See L. S. Gatagova et al., eds., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros, 1: 1918–1933* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), 94–95, 94.

⁵ Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” 52.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Voroshilov's letter to Stalin, 21 January 1923 (Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 94).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 95.

leading Bolsheviks toward indigenous local Communists, whom they often regarded as too lenient and inclined to compromise and thus not likely to enforce radical changes. Yet Voroshilov acknowledged that for the time being, there simply was no alternative.¹⁰

The Bolsheviks' readiness to cooperate with Muslims and thereby to accept, at least for the time being, the existence of sharia courts, Islamic schools, or Islamic charitable endowments (*waqf*), did not reflect a tolerant mindset. Rather, it constituted a flexible policy approach of forging tactical alliances with various forces and factions within society in exchange for loyalty. This approach largely grew out of the experience of the Civil War, which in the North Caucasus and in other places such as Central Asia lasted well into the 1920s. While Muslims flooded the ranks of the Communists in their struggle against the representatives of the former tsarist regime, many took up arms against the Bolsheviks in response to the social and economic crises brought about in the course of war by famine, the ruthless behavior by members of the Red Army and the secret police, and forceful grain requisitions ordered by the Soviet authorities. While many areas of the former Russian Empire saw peasant unrest, the largest armed revolts broke out in Muslim borderland regions, which looked back on long and fierce colonial wars during the 19th century.

In Central Asia, the bloodiest of these revolts was the so-called Basmachi Uprising, which had started in 1918 in the Ferghana Valley and later spread to other parts of Turkestan as well as the former tsarist protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara. The revolt was suppressed by the Red Army by mid-1922, yet armed bands and smaller rebellions continued to trouble the region well into the 1930s.¹¹ In the North Caucasus, the largest anti-Soviet rebellion began in the summer of 1920 and was led by a number of sheikhs, among them Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii, who had never allied with either the Whites or the Bolsheviks. Although the Red Army succeeded by the spring of 1921 in defeating this rebellion after hard-won battles, Gotsinskii remained at large, as did a number of other prominent anti-Soviet rebel leaders.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sergei Abashin with Kamoludin Abdullaev, Ravshan Abdullaev, and Arslan Koichiev, "Soviet Rule and the Delineation of Borders in the Ferghana Valley, 1917–1930," in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2011), 94–118, 99–102. For an inside account on the Basmachi movement, see H. B. Paksoy, "The Basmachi Movement from Within: An Account of Zeki Velidi Togan," *Nationalities Papers* 23, 2 (1995): 373–99.

¹² Khadzhi Murat Donogo, "Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 6 (2005): 34–57, 46–50. For a general overview, see I. Kh. Sulaev, *Musul'manskoe dukhovenstvo Dagestana*

In this situation, achieving stability dominated the agenda of the Bolshevik leadership. One way to win non-Russians and Muslims over was to accommodate aspirations for self-determination through the creation of autonomous administrative units in the form of ethnically defined regions (*oblasti*) and republics. Within these territories, members of the so-called titular nationalities were actively promoted to administrative positions of power. This policy constituted an important aspect of the Bolshevik program of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), the promotion of national languages and cultures.¹³ At the same time, the creation of new ethnically defined territories was meant to strengthen (or create) ethnic national identity as opposed to Muslim or larger regional—for example, pan-Turkic—identities. Creating autonomous administrative units was thus seen as essential to achieving efficient control and modernization in these economically backward regions.¹⁴

Another strategy was to enter into alliances with diverse representatives of Muslim society. The Bolsheviks' most natural allies were Muslim socialist reformers and members of the intelligentsia, some of whom had already allied with the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, although others fiercely opposed them from the beginning. In addition to these Russian-educated Muslims, however, the Bolsheviks also reached out to Muslim traditional believers and Sufi sheikhs, whom they co-opted into party and state structures, in several instances even into regional governments. In Dagestan, Sheikh Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskii, one of the key leaders of Muslim resistance against the White movement in the North Caucasus, was invited into the Dagestan revkom in 1920 and appointed head of the Sharia Department of Dagestan's People's Commissariat of Justice, a post he held until December 1921, when he had a falling-out with Soviet power.¹⁵ In Bukhara, at least 1 of the 11 members of the regional Soviet government in 1923 seems to have been a "mullah" (a

i svetskaia vlast': Bor'ba i sotrudnichestvo (Makhachkala: Dagestanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2004).

¹³ On the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia*, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Abashin, "Soviet Rule and the Delineation of Borders in the Ferghana Valley," 105; Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 82.

¹⁵ Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskii subsequently retreated to his home district (Akusha), where he wielded considerable influence. He was arrested with his family in 1928. See Vladimir Bobrovnikov, "Waqf Endowments in Daghestani Village Communities: From the 1917 Revolution to the Collectivization," *Die Welt des Islam* 50, 3 (2010): 477–502, 481; and "Mirotvorets Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskii," *Dagestanskia pravda*, 27 October 2009 (<http://dagistanhistory.livejournal.com/8232.html>, accessed 7 January 2013). For a recent defensive

designation generally used by the Bolsheviks for Islamic teachers or spiritual figures).¹⁶ In Turkestan in the early 1920s, the Central Committee had a Muslim majority,¹⁷ and half the members of the regional communist party were reportedly religious believers.¹⁸

Although the Bolshevik party leadership backed the policy of co-optation, indigenous Muslim “national Communists” played a key role in bringing about these alliances.¹⁹ These national Communists were often convinced Bolsheviks, yet many of them advocated coexistence between Islam and socialism. For example, in June 1923, Sultanbek Kodzhdanov, the deputy first secretary of the Turkestan Communist Party, argued before a large session of delegates from the national regions and republics held in Moscow that going against religion would only play into the hands of those who condemned Bolshevik Sovietization attempts as a new colonial project. He considered Islam a “very good thing,” which should be used as a civilizing force to tie the people to the Soviet cause and counter anti-Soviet tendencies.²⁰ Moreover, as his comrade from Bukhara, Faisulla Khodzhaev, explained during the same meeting, restoring sharia courts or returning confiscated *waqf* property to the mosques would restore functioning social structures in light of the almost total absence of Soviet state structures.²¹

Very little is known about Bolshevik policy toward those local Muslim religious leaders who were temporarily co-opted into government structures, despite the large body of Western literature on the formation of the Soviet Union, including surveys of the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as general studies on Soviet policies toward Islam and on the fates of prominent national

biography on Akushinskii, see M. A. Abdullaev, *Triumf i tragediia sheikh-ul'-islama Dagestana Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskogo* (Makhachkala: Epokha, 2013).

¹⁶ Stalin alluded to this in his speech before representatives from nearly all the national regions and republics at the fourth session of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) (CC RCP[b]), Moscow, 9–12 June 1923. See *Tainy natsional'noi politiki TsK RKP: Chetvertoe soveshchanie TsK RKP s otvetstvennymi rabotnikami natsional'nykh respublik i oblastei v Moskve 9–12 iyunia 1923 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: INSAN, 1992), 262.

¹⁷ Most of these appear to have been Jadids advocating coexistence between Islam and socialism. See Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 298.

¹⁸ Sultanbek Khodzhanov, a delegate from Turkestan, made this claim in his speech at the fourth session of the CC RCP(b), Moscow, 9–12 June 1923 (*Tainy natsional'noi politiki TsK RKP*, 111).

¹⁹ Alexandre Bennigsen introduced this term to denote the wide spectrum of Muslim communist leaders (*Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*).

²⁰ *Tainy natsional'noi politiki TsK RKP*, 111–12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 166–67.

Communists during Stalinism.²² There are hardly any detailed studies explaining how alliances between the Bolsheviks and these Muslim religious representatives came about, which actors were involved in these decisions, and how the Bolsheviks eventually extracted themselves from these alliances of convenience.

This article sheds light on these questions by analyzing one of the most intriguing examples of co-optation: the case of Ali Mitaev, a prominent political and religious leader in Chechnya at the time. Initially an ally of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War, he fell out of grace with the leading Bolshevik representative in Chechnya early in 1920. During the meeting in Urus-Martan in January 1923, the Soviet delegates invited Mitaev to negotiate. They agreed to include him in the Chechen revkom, where he became an official member in April 1923. After holding this office for about a year, he was arrested by the Soviet secret police in April 1924 and put to death in October 1925. Shortly before his execution, the Soviet leadership launched a major disarmament drive in Chechnya and removed leading figures of the Chechen government from their posts—including El'darkhanov, who had supported Mitaev. The disarmament campaign also targeted Gotsinskii and a number of other leading anti-Bolshevik rebels, who were captured, arrested, and shot.

Mitaev's fate, which can be traced through published Soviet documents and original sources from Russian archives, sheds light on the establishment of Soviet power in Chechnya during the formative period of state building in the early 1920s. This article thereby provides insight into the fluidity of state-building processes that characterized the situation in one of the most troublesome spots of the Soviet Union. The history of Chechnya in the early Soviet period remains largely underexplored, despite numerous recent studies—mostly historical overviews of Chechen history rather than in-depth historical investigations—that have sought to better understand the roots of the Chechen wars of secession in the 1990s.²³ The case of Mitaev illustrates

²² See, e.g., Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2003); Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule* (London: Routledge, 2010); Adrienne L. Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); or the comprehensive work on Stalinism in Central Asia by Niccolò Pianciola, *Stalinismo di frontiera: Colonizzazione agricola, sterminio dei nomadi e costruzione statale in Asia centrale, 1905–1936* (Rome: Viella, 2009). On policy, see, e.g., Bennigsen's "Paris school," which published on Soviet policy on Islam during the 1960s and 1970s (Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejaye, *Les mouvements nationaux chez les Musulmans de Russie, 1: Le "Sultangalievisme" au Tatarstan* [Paris: Mouton, 1960]; Bennigsen, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*).

²³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Robert Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800–2000: A*

how the key players of the early 1920s—namely, the Chechen government led by El'darkhanov, the Southeastern Bureau led by Mikoian, and agents of the local branches of the Soviet secret police (the GPU/OGPU), whose members had opposed co-opting Mitaev in the first place, viewed the political situation and sought to enforce their various claims.²⁴ Investigating the case of Ali Mitaev also improves our understanding of Soviet nationality policies, the Bolsheviks' attitude toward Muslims, and the complex struggle for power and influence in the non-Russian Muslim borderlands of the Soviet Union.

The Bolsheviks and the Question of Autonomy

The North Caucasus represented one of the bloodiest arenas of the Russian Civil War, with tens of thousands of lives lost, hundreds of settlements destroyed, and large parts of the economy devastated. By the spring of 1920, the Bolsheviks and the Red Army, in conjunction with their Muslim allies, had managed to annihilate the Army of Volunteers commanded by General Anton Denikin. The remnants of this army were pushed back to Crimea, from where they eventually evacuated.²⁵

In the northeastern part of the Caucasus, two Dagestani sheikhs led the resistance against Denikin during the Civil War. Usun-Khadzhi Saltinskii (1845?–1920) organized the armed resistance in the mountainous parts of Chechnya and founded the North Caucasus Emirate, an Islamic state that existed from September 1919 to April 1920.²⁶ Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskii (1847–1930) was, as noted above, one of the major leaders of resistance in

Deadly Embrace (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001); Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Ben Fowkes, ed., *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis. Essays on Russo-Chechen relations* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998). The exception is Alex Marshall's *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, to date the best Western study on the North Caucasus during the early Soviet period. A number of in-depth studies have recently appeared on *povstanchestvo* in the North Caucasus during the early 1920s. See, e.g., S. S. Magamadov and Dzh. I. Meskhidze, "Iz istorii povstanchesкого dvizheniia na severo-vostochnom Kavkaze (20-e gg XX v.)," *Vestnik Akademii nauk Chechenskoi Respubliki* 15, 2 (2011): 91–102.

²⁴ V. I. Lenin created the All-Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counterrevolution, Speculation, and Sabotage, better known as the Cheka, in December 1917. In February 1922, the Cheka was formally reconstituted as the GPU (State Political Administration) and incorporated into the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD RSFSR), and from November 1923 on, into the Soviet Council of People's Commissars, nominally the highest executive organ of the Soviet Union. Subsequently, the organization once more changed its name to OGPU (Unified State Political Administration).

²⁵ For a general overview of events in the North Caucasus during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, see Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, 51–147.

²⁶ Aleksei Kosterin, *1919–1920: V gorakh Kavkaza. Istoricheskie ocherki Gorskogo revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia* (Vladikavkaz: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921), 28, 35–37.

Dagestan. These two sheikhs fought alongside Bolshevik forces not because they sympathized with communist atheist ideology but as allies bound together by a common threat.

In contrast to the Cossack communities of the Don and Terek, most of which aligned themselves with Denikin (although some fought against him), many non-Russian peoples of the North Caucasus, and the Muslims of Russia in general, were opposed to the prospect of a restoration of power under the slogan "Russia one and indivisible," as professed by Denikin and other former tsarist generals.²⁷ Moreover, the White Army's often ruthless behavior and the haughty attitude of its generals drove many into the Bolshevik camp. Denikin's troops were defeated by early 1920, however, and these alliances immediately began to disintegrate. The Red Army started to behave like an occupying force, and local Bolshevik representatives often showed open contempt for the population's religious traditions and customs.²⁸ As a result, the region saw a surge in violent clashes, threatening to drive leading figures of the former North Caucasian anti-White resistance into opposition to the Bolsheviks.

In Chechnya, the Bolsheviks liberated themselves from a formidable potential adversary when Sheikh Usun-Khadzhi unexpectedly died in April 1920, and they quickly set out to eliminate his emirate.²⁹ In Dagestan, however, they faced a massive armed uprising in the summer of 1920. This movement, which started in the Dagestani districts of Andiiskii, Gubinskii, and Avarskii, called itself the Sharia Army of Mountain Peoples and numbered several thousand armed followers. By early 1921, it had engulfed large parts of mountainous Chechnya as well. It was supported by several influential sheikhs, among them the former mufti of the North Caucasus, Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii (1859–1925), who had opposed Denikin, the Communists, and those who allied with the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, such as Ali-Khadzhi Akushinskii.³⁰

²⁷ A. I. Denikin, *Ocherki Russkoi Smuty* (Berlin: Slovo, 1925), 4:114.

²⁸ Donogo, "Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii," 46.

²⁹ Shortly before his death, the Bolsheviks led negotiations with Usun-Khadzhi and apparently even offered to acknowledge him as imam (Kosterin, *1919–1920: V gorakh Kavkaza*, 98–99).

³⁰ Donogo, "Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii," 46–50. Unlike Mitaev, Gotsinskii became fairly well known in Western academic literature through his opponents' publications in the 1920s. These included Aleksandr Todorskii, who commanded the 11th Red Army in the North Caucasus, as well as leading Dagestani Communists Alibek Takho-Godi and Nazhmuddin P. Samurskii. See Marie Bennigsen Broxup, "The Last Ghazawat: The 1920–21 Uprising," in *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, ed. Broxup (London: C. Hurst, 1992), 112–45, 117.

At the same time, the Bolsheviks faced massive Cossack uprisings in other parts of the North Caucasus and a real threat of outside intervention: North Caucasian émigré circles provided support for Gotsinskii and called on outside powers for military assistance. This was especially true of émigrés operating from Georgia, then still controlled by a Menshevik government (Azerbaijan and Armenia had fallen to the Bolsheviks in 1920, but the Red Army occupied Georgia only in February 1921).³¹

In a situation of continuing external military danger and increasing internal volatility, Iosif Stalin, the people's commissar for nationality affairs, was the one who understood that the Bolsheviks needed to pay closer attention to the nationality question and make efforts to win over non-Russians and Muslims if they were to prevail. Already in December 1917, the Council of People's Commissars issued its famous "Appeal to the Moslems of Russia and the East," signed by Stalin and Vladimir Lenin, promising that their "beliefs and customs, [their] national and cultural institutions," were "free and inviolable." In return for the protection of these rights, Bolshevik leaders asked for "sympathy and support" in their "cause of building a new world."³²

During the Civil War, Stalin took measures to co-opt, and thus bring under control, leading Muslim organizations, creating Muslim institutions (such as the Central Muslim Commissariat in Moscow) and organizing all-Muslim conferences.³³ Toward the end of the war, when cracks began to appear in the alliances forged between the Bolsheviks and Muslim leaders, the Soviet leadership issued several appeals for caution. In April 1920, Lenin urged local party representatives and members of the Red Army in the North Caucasus to show more sensitivity and a "maximum of goodwill" toward the Muslim population. Moreover, he appealed to the comrades in the North Caucasus to show sympathy for these peoples' aspirations for "autonomy and independence."³⁴ Lenin had issued a similar statement to the comrades in Turkestan already in November 1919.³⁵

³¹ Magamadov and Meskhidze, "Iz istorii povstancheskogo dvizheniia na severo-vostochnom Kavkaze," 92–94.

³² Addressed to all "Moslems of Russia, Tartars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz, and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tartars of Transcaucasia, Chechens and Mountaineers of the Caucasus," the appeal was published in *Izvestiia*, 7 December 1917, 1–2 (translation from www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1921east1&SubjectID=1921muslim&Year=1921, accessed 1 February 2014).

³³ Bennigsen, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*, 27–29, 60.

³⁴ Lenin to G. K. Ordzhonikidze, 2 April 1920 (V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniia* [Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1952], 30:460).

³⁵ V. I. Lenin, "To the Communists of Turkestan," 7–8 November 1919, published in *Turkestanskii Kommunist*, *Izvestiia TsK Sovetov Turkestanskoi Respubliki*, and *Krasnyi Front*.

To be sure, the Bolshevik leadership never intended to allow non-Russian peoples to secede from Soviet Russia, yet they were willing to absorb their hopes of freedom in the framework of territorial autonomy. In the autumn of 1920, Stalin traveled to the North Caucasus to instigate two state-building projects: the Republic of Dagestan (Dagestanskaia ASSR), which was founded on 13 November 1920, and the Soviet Mountain Republic (Gorskaia ASSR), established four days later. While the Dagestan ASSR was essentially an enlarged version of the Dagestan region, which already existed before the 1917 revolution, the Soviet Mountain Republic encompassed the non-Russian peoples living south of the Terek River in the former Terek region—including, in addition to several Cossack communities, Chechens, Ingush, Ossetes, Balkars, Kabardians, and Karachai. Each nationality was granted its own ethnic district (*okrug*), while the two Russian-populated cities Vladikavkaz and Groznyi formed separate administrative entities within the republic.³⁶

When local Communists of the North Caucasus first debated the idea of creating an autonomous Soviet Mountain Republic, a majority disapproved. They feared that the formation of such an entity would play into the hands of those “reactionary” forces that dreamed of Caucasian unity and secession from Russia.³⁷ In fact, the years 1917–20 had seen several attempts to form a united North Caucasus region. The first and most important was the creation of the Union of United Mountaineers of the North Caucasus and Dagestan (*Soiuz ob"edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza i Dagestana*), founded in May 1917 by a broad coalition of members of the North Caucasian intelligentsia. After the October Revolution, this union renamed itself the Mountain Republic and in April 1918 formally declared its independence from Russia. These efforts to build a secular state were paralleled by attempts to unite the North Caucasian mountaineers within the framework of an Islamic state, such as Usun-Khadzhi's short-lived North Caucasus Emirate.³⁸

English translation in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 30:138.

³⁶ Artur Tsutsiev, *Atlas etnopoliticheskoi istorii Kavkaza, 1774–2004* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006), 49, 63. On the Soviet Mountain Republic, see V. D. Dzidzoev, *Ot soiuz ob"edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza i Dagestana do Gorskoi ASSR (1917–1924): Nachal'nyi etap natsional'no-gosudarstvennogo stroitel'stva narodov Severnogo Kavkaza v XX veke* (Vladikavkaz: Izdatel'stvo Severo-Osetinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2003), 65–169; and A. Kh. Daudov, *Gorskaia ASSR (1921–1924 gg.): Ocherki sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 1997).

³⁷ Dzidzoev, *Ot soiuz ob"edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza*, 79.

³⁸ G. I. Kakagasanov et al., eds., *Soiuz ob"edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza i Dagestana (1917–1918 gg.), Gorskaia Respublika (1918–1920 gg.): Dokumenty i materialy* (Makhachkala: Institut istorii, arkheologii i etnografii, 1994); T. M. Muzaev, *Soiuz gortsev: Russkaia revoliutsiia*

Bolshevik leaders reasoned differently from local Communists in initiating their state-building projects in the North Caucasus. On the one hand, they saw the creation of the Soviet Mountain Republic as a continuation of their own short-lived state-building efforts in the North Caucasus. In March 1918, for instance, they had founded the Terek Soviet Republic, which was effectively crushed by Denikin's forces in the summer of 1918.³⁹ On the other hand, the Bolsheviks viewed their offer of unity and autonomy as a way to undermine alternative state-building projects, both those professed by Gotsinskii, whose aim was to establish an Islamic state based on sharia, and those secular projects favored by North Caucasian émigré groups.⁴⁰

In his speeches on the occasion of the foundation of the Soviet Mountain Republic and the Republic of Dagestan, Stalin explicitly agreed to allow the continued practice of sharia and *adat*, North Caucasus customary law. This cohered with his understanding of autonomy, which included the right of individual peoples to organize life according to their own traditions and customs. Moreover, the very "meaning of autonomy," Stalin explained, was to draw members of the titular nations, who knew the language and were accustomed to the ways of life, into government bodies on all levels. Autonomy would give a people back the liberties that the "bloodsucking tsars" and the "tyrannous tsarist generals" had taken from them, and teach them to "stand on [their] own feet."⁴¹ Stalin made it clear, however, that in exchange for granting such autonomy, he would demand unconditional loyalty to Soviet power, especially since the region still faced an imminent threat posed by the Gotsinskii uprising.⁴²

Stalin's promise regarding the right to uphold sharia, which the tsarist administrators in the Caucasus never officially prohibited but sought to suppress in favor of a codification of customary law, was later reaffirmed.⁴³ In April 1921, the government of the Soviet Mountain Republic issued the provision that all its citizens would be allowed the right to vote, including for

i narody Severnogo Kavkaza, 1917–mart 1918 g. (Moscow: Patriia, 2007); Dzidzoev, *Ot soiuzu ob 'edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza*, 22–64.

³⁹ S. A. Kondratov, ed., *Revoliutsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Rossii v 1917–1923: Entsiklopediia*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Terra, 2008), 4:62–63, 205, 420.

⁴⁰ Dzidzoev, *Ot soiuzu ob 'edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza*, 109–11.

⁴¹ I. V. Stalin, "Report on Soviet Autonomy for the Terek Region and Concluding Remarks during the Congress of the Peoples of the Terek Region, 17 November 1920," in Stalin, *Works* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), 4:412–20.

⁴² I. V. Stalin, "Declaration on Soviet Autonomy for Dagestan and Concluding Remarks during the Congress of the Peoples of Dagestan, 13 November 1920," in *ibid.*, 4:407–11 (reference to Gotsinskii on 410).

⁴³ V. O. Bobrovnikov and I. L. Babich, eds., *Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007), 191–94.

those “mullahs” who had shown themselves to be “active revolutionaries and advocates of the interests of the working masses.”⁴⁴ This seemingly tolerant attitude vis-à-vis Muslims and their institutions was supported by later directives from the Moscow central government, such as the one issued by the People’s Commissariat for Nationality Affairs on 16 December 1922, urging local authorities to refrain from using repressive methods against members of the Islamic clergy and to allow preaching of “religious dogmas” in mosques and private homes.⁴⁵

If Dagestan survived as a separate administrative entity, the Soviet Mountain Republic was soon dissolved. Not only were relations among the different ethnic groups often fraught with tension (conflict was especially fierce between the Ingush and the Ossetes, as well as the Balkars and the Kabardians), but once the Red Army had invaded Georgia in February 1921, defeating the bulk of Gotsinskii’s armed forces a few months later, an important rationale for the creation of this republic ceased to exist, as Stalin himself acknowledged.⁴⁶ Already in May 1921, the leader of the Kabardian district, Betal Kalmykov, openly argued that his territory should secede from the Soviet Mountain Republic, and Moscow granted Kabarda the status of an autonomous region in September 1921.⁴⁷ During 1922, the Karachai, Balkar, and Chechen autonomous regions were created, and by July 1924, the Mountain Republic was finally dissolved when the Ingush and Ossetes separated into two distinct autonomous regions.⁴⁸ If Kabarda’s split from the Mountain Republic was largely initiated from below, however, the same cannot be said of the developments that led to the formation of a Chechen autonomous region.

Autonomy for the Chechens

Initially, the creation of an autonomous Chechen region did not seem to be on anybody’s agenda. Chechnya was mostly rural, and it did not have a single city or industry of its own that might have served as a vehicle for modernization. For its economic development, the region relied largely on its links to Grozny, a booming industrial city with some 23,000 workers, and the payments

⁴⁴ Daudov, *Gorskaia ASSR*, 53–54.

⁴⁵ In Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional’nyi vopros*, 90.

⁴⁶ Daudov, *Gorskaia ASSR*, 171.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 165, 173.

⁴⁸ At this point, the two cities Vladikavkaz and Grozny, as well as the Sunzha district (*okrug*) of the Cossacks, remained separate administrative units. They were included into North Ossetia and Chechnya respectively only in 1928. During the early Soviet period, the North Caucasus region saw many more territorial-administrative changes (Tsutsiev, *Atlas etnopoliticheskoi istorii Kavkaza*, 61–78).

received from the Groznyi oil company, Grozneft'.⁴⁹ Accordingly, the notion that Chechnya might exist as a separate autonomous territory seemed rather far-fetched. Unlike Kalmykov, who pled for Kabardian territorial autonomy, El'darkhanov did not approach the central Soviet government with demands for a separate Chechen autonomous region.

The creation of an autonomous Chechen region does not seem to have figured high in the minds of leading Bolsheviks either, at first. Other questions were more pressing, notably how to stop the rise of what was generally labeled "banditry" (*banditizm*). Karl Lander, who then represented the secret police in the North Caucasus, reported in February 1922 that among the mountain peoples, "like the Chechens, the Kabardians, and a part of the Karachai people," who "hitherto [had been] well-disposed" toward them unrest was growing, and that the Chechens had started to carry out ambushes against the oil installations close to Groznyi, "which [had] not [been] the case until now."⁵⁰ This was all the more disconcerting to the author of the report because he linked the domestic with an international situation that was still perceived as threatening.⁵¹

To Lander, it was not obvious why the creation of autonomous regions should contribute to the stabilization of the region. Lander charged that the projects of "autonomists of the Soviet type," among whom he specifically counted Betal Kalmykov and Grigorii Ordzhonikidze, played into the hands of counterrevolutionary forces working to split off the Caucasus from Russia.⁵² Instead, Lander proposed that all Cossacks be evacuated (tens of thousands had already been deported after the end of the war as punishment for their collaboration with the Whites).⁵³ The deportation of the Cossacks would not only allow Soviet rulers to rid themselves of a hostile segment of the population but would also satisfy the territorial demands of the Chechens, Lander argued. To suppress the influence of counterrevolutionary forces

⁴⁹ Daudov, *Gorskaia ASSR*, 187.

⁵⁰ Lander, Report to the CC RCP(b) [before 11 February 1922], in Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 60–64, 61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵² Ordzhonikidze was a leading figure in the Caucasus during the Civil War. In April 1918, Lenin appointed him temporary extraordinary commissar (*Vremennyi chrezvychainyi komissar*) for southern Russia. In February 1922, he was appointed first secretary of the South Caucasus Regional Committee of the RCP(b).

⁵³ The Bolshevik leadership in the spring of 1920 ordered the resettlement of some 25,000 Cossacks, roughly one-tenth of the entire Cossack population of the Terek region (E. F. Zhupikova, "Povstanskoe dvizhenie na Severnom Kavkaze v 1920–1925 godakh," in *Akademiia istoricheskikh nauk: Sbornik trudov* (Moscow: Akademiia istoricheskikh nauk, 2007), 1:114–319, 156–57.

effectively, he also recommended that the adjacent territories of the region be placed under direct military control.⁵⁴

The Soviet leadership did not follow Lander's recommendations. For the time being, there would be no further large-scale deportations of Cossacks.⁵⁵ Yet the situation in Chechnya continued to deteriorate at this time. According to a report compiled by Mikoian in October 1922, ambushes by Chechens were no longer directed against only Cossack settlements, as they had frequently been in the past. Chechens increasingly attacked the railway, killed members of the Red Army, and intensified their attacks on Grozni oil production sites.⁵⁶ Frequently, ambushes were abetted by the very members of local militias tasked by the government of the Soviet Mountain Republic with fighting banditry.⁵⁷

In his report of October 1922, Mikoian for the first time advocated military action in response to this situation. A large-scale military action was, according to Mikoian, an indispensable requirement for a return to normality in Chechnya.⁵⁸ His report stipulated other measures as well, such as reconsidering the tax in kind (*prodnalog*), which was seen as one of the key reasons for the widespread sense of grievance among the population.⁵⁹ The aim of such military action was not only to smash the armed bands but also to disarm the male population. Mikoian estimated that the local population in Chechnya and Ingushetia still owned around 70,000 rifles.⁶⁰

The disarmament of Chechnya would indeed take place, but not until about three years later. For the time being, the party leaders decided to follow a different course. Based on Mikoian's report, the situation in the Soviet Mountain Republic was discussed during a meeting of the Organizational

⁵⁴ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 63.

⁵⁵ On the contrary, in the 1920s, relations between Soviet power and the Cossacks gradually normalized, and it was probably Mikoian in particular who responded to the concerns of the Cossack population and acted as their advocate. See A. I. Mikoian, report to Molotov [late 1924], Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f. 17, op. 67, d. 172, ll. 73–78; Mikoian, *Tak bylo: Razmysleniia o minuvshem* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 224–26. See also Mikoian, unpublished notes, 1971, RGASPI f. 84, op. 3, d. 120, ll. 53–61.

⁵⁶ A. I. Mikoian, report to CC RCP(b), 1 October 1922, in Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 84–87, 85.

⁵⁷ Telegram from the provincial committee (*gubernskii komitet*) to CC RCP(b) on Chechen robberies, 14–27 October 1922, in *ibid.*, 87–88.

⁵⁸ Mikoian, report to CC RCP(b), 1 October 1922, 84–87.

⁵⁹ The Bolsheviks had introduced this tax across the country as early as the spring of 1921 as part of their New Economic Policy (NEP) to replace the even harsher War Communism measure of governmental confiscation of grain.

⁶⁰ Mikoian, report to CC RCP(b), 1 October 1922, 85.

Bureau (Orgburo) in Moscow on 9 October 1922.⁶¹ Most likely, it was during this meeting that the Bolsheviks first considered the creation of an autonomous Chechen region. In his memoirs, Mikoian claims to have been the first to propose a separate national territory for the Chechens.⁶² In the minutes of the Orgburo for 9 October 1922, however, there is no hint that the idea came from Mikoian. There is only a reference to Stalin having raised the “new question regarding the possibility of giving Chechnya separate status as an autonomous region.”⁶³ To evaluate the question, the bureau decided to form a commission. Along with Mikoian, its members included Voroshilov and Sergei Kirov, who was first secretary of the Azerbaijan Central Committee. Until the question of autonomy had been conclusively resolved, the Orgburo explicitly banned any repressive measures against Chechens.⁶⁴

It is likely that Chechens themselves were consulted only after the meeting of 9 October 1922. Having conferred with the locals, on 22 October the commission submitted a list of the 13-member future Chechen government, which was to be formed as a revkom.⁶⁵ Besides El'darkhanov, who was appointed chairman, the government consisted of ten more Chechens—only three of them Communists (both non-Chechens were also Communists).⁶⁶ Thus it is likely that the government included a substantial portion of Chechnya's Communists at the time.⁶⁷ The Orgburo accepted

⁶¹ The Orgburo of the CC RCP(b) was created in 1919 and consisted of members of the Central Committee. As the leading board of the Party, its tasks were similar to those of the Secretariat of the Central Committee and the Politburo. The Orgburo existed until 1952, but its importance diminished. Some members of the Orgburo, among them Stalin, were intermittently members of all three boards. See John Löwenhardt, *The Soviet Politburo*, trans. Dymphna Clark (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 78–80.

⁶² Supposedly, he first discussed the idea with Feliks Dzerzhinskii, founder of the Cheka, and then took the proposition to Stalin for approval (Mikoian, *Tak bylo*, 229).

⁶³ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 87 n. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Initially, these institutions—some of which had already been set up during the Russian Civil War—were considered exceptional instruments of government for a period of transition, after which they were to be replaced with elected councils (soviets). Because of the difficulties in conducting regular elections for the councils, however, revkomy in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus existed intermittently until the mid-1920s, sometimes simultaneously with regularly elected soviets (N. F. Bugai and D. Kh. Mekulov, *Narody i vlast': "Sotsialisticheskii eksperiment" (20-e gody)* [Maikop: Meoty, 1994], 71).

⁶⁶ Minutes of the commission of the CC RCP(b) on Chechnya's separation from the Soviet Mountain Republic of 22 October 1922, in Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 88–89.

⁶⁷ Mikoian mentions that there was a grand total of ten Chechen Communists in Chechnya at the time (report to CC RCP(b), 1 October 1922, 84); El'darkhanov mentioned that there were “hardly any Communists” in Chechnya in his remarks at the fourth session of the CC RCP(b), Moscow, 9–12 June 1923 (*Tainy natsional'noi politiki TsK RKP*, 169).

the commission's proposal. As per the decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of 20 November 1922, Chechnya was separated from the Mountain Republic and given the status of an autonomous region on 30 November 1922.⁶⁸

How can this change of opinion among Bolshevik leaders be explained? Why did they refrain from military action? Based on the fact that Stalin himself promoted the creation of an autonomous Chechen region, this decision may reflect his basic ideas concerning the question of nationality and autonomy. The Chechens as a compact settlement community with about 290,000 members—bound together by a shared language, territory, and economic and cultural lifestyle—more than matched the criteria for the establishment of an autonomous region.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Stalin's interest in the matter should also be considered against the background of an internal political power struggle. He may have regarded the case of Chechnya as another opportunity to increase the attractiveness of Soviet power, and thus of his own person as the head of the People's Commissariat for Nationality Affairs. Against the background of his ambitions to power, this was not unimportant, as it constituted a central factor in the struggle against internal opponents such as Lev Trotskii, Grigorii Zinov'ev, Lev Kamenev, Nikolai Bukharin, or Aleksei Rykov. Without the support of non-Russians, not only might Stalin have failed to promote his concept of autonomy successfully, but he could even have been defeated in the internal struggle with his opponents.⁷⁰

The particularly difficult situation in Chechnya, however, also appears to have greatly influenced deliberations about the granting of autonomy. Wishing to avoid the risk of alienating the population from Soviet power even more through a military operation, possibly provoking increased disturbances, the Bolsheviks preferred to hand over responsibility to the Chechens themselves. Accordingly, the granting of autonomy was bound to conditions. Item 7 of the commission's 22 October 1922 report unambiguously demanded that the Chechen revkom take all necessary measures to stop "attacks by Chechens against members of the Red Army, industrial installations, [and] the railway lines." Thus autonomy also meant that it would henceforth be possible clearly to assign responsibility for such incidents, because "for every breach

⁶⁸ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 89 n. 2.

⁶⁹ The figure of 290,000 is derived from the census of 1926 and includes over 90 percent of Chechens; the rest of the population was settled in neighboring territories, mostly in Dagestan (almost 7 percent). According to the 1926 census, there were 318,522 Chechens living in the USSR as a whole (http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr_nac_26.php, accessed 6 February 2013). See also N. F. Bugai and A. M. Gonov, *Kavkaz: Narody v eshelonakh (20–60-e gody)* (Moscow: INSAN, 1998), 58.

⁷⁰ Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall*, 199.

of the order in autonomous Chechnya,” as the report stated, “responsibility should lie with the Chechen revkom.”⁷¹ In that way, the Bolsheviks removed themselves from the firing line while retaining the option to blame the revkom in case of difficulties.

Hardly anybody familiar with the situation in Chechnya anticipated that the revkom under El’darkhanov might quickly succeed in stabilizing the situation on its own, thus creating the requirement for regular elections to soviets. In Chechen society, allegiances were still first and foremost bound to the family and the respective clans and village communities, and beyond that, to charismatic Muslim leaders. As an ethnic Chechen, El’darkhanov may well have enjoyed sympathy among the population, but this did not yet grant him the authority necessary to enforce new notions of state order. Such authority could not be attained without the inclusion of representatives from Chechen society. When a Soviet delegation departed for Urus-Martan in January 1923 to deliver Moscow’s decision concerning the creation of an autonomous Chechen region, it was precisely on this basis that the Bolsheviks proposed that one of the most influential figures at the time, Ali Mitaev, should become a member of the new Chechen government.

The Ali Mitaev Phenomenon

Mitaev, who showed up at the meeting in Urus-Matan with a stately escort of armed men on horseback, must have made a grand impression on the Soviet delegates. In his letter to Stalin, Voroshilov calls him a “devilishly smart and crafty” man.⁷² On the evening after the meeting ended, the Soviet delegates asked El’darkhanov to establish contact with Mitaev through local Chechens and invite him to talks.⁷³ According to Mikoian’s detailed description of this meeting, Mitaev, who arrived with two heavily armed bodyguards, was a “well-proportioned [man], in Chechen dress, armed with a dagger [*kinzhal*], a saber [*shashka*] and a pistol [*mauser*].”⁷⁴ As he apparently did not speak any Russian, El’darkhanov served as translator. After a long discussion, the Soviet delegates offered to make Mitaev a regular member of the revkom, a proposal to which the young Chechen agreed.⁷⁵ On 12 April 1923, the leaders in Moscow gave their blessing, and Mitaev was officially appointed a member of the Chechen government and put in charge of guarding trains and stations from ambushes. Henceforth, a 100-strong detachment of his murids (Arab.

⁷¹ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional’nyi vopros*, 89.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” 53.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

murīd, literally “committed one,” a member of a *tariqa*, a Sufi brotherhood) was paid by the Soviet government to fulfill this task.⁷⁶

Ali Mitaev had been born in the settlement of Avtury in what was later the Shali district, probably around 1891.⁷⁷ He went to primary school in Groznyi, then studied at an Islamic institution, where he was trained as a cleric. Besides Chechen and Arabic, he may have had some knowledge of Russian, yet the sources differ as to his proficiency in this language.⁷⁸

Ali came from an influential Chechen family. His father was none other than the well-known Sheikh Bamat Girei Khadzhi Mitaev (1838?–1914), an adherent of the famous Chechen sheikh Kunta-Khadzhi, the founder of the Sufi brotherhood of the Qadiriyya in Chechnya. After Kunta-Khadzhi's death in Russian exile in 1867, Bamat Girei Khadzhi rose to become one of the most important leaders of the Qadiriyya. He was revered as a “holy man,” and had a large group of murid followers.⁷⁹ In 1912, the tsarist administration, as a punishment for the sheik's alleged support of the notorious Chechen

⁷⁶ According to El'darkhanov, 98 persons were appointed to guard the railroad (“Report on the Economic and Socio-Political Situation, 25 August 1923,” in *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast' Problema Chechni i Ingushetii vo vnutrennei politike Rossii i SSSR (nachalo XIX–seredina XX v.)*, ed. V. A. Kozlov et al. [Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2011], 482–503, here 484).

⁷⁷ Contemporary sources offer different birth dates for Mitaev, but the early 1890s seem most plausible. A 1911 document commissioned by the tsarist administration of the Terek region contains an entry on Ali's father, Sheikh Bamat Girei Khadzhi, and lists his two sons Ali and Umar. According to this source, Ali was 20 years old at that time and already married to his wife Nabi. Omar was 16 and unmarried (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [GARF] f. 102, op. 146, d. 635–2, ll. 91–93, 92 ob.). Later reports provide different dates. The North Caucasus prosecutors' document of 24 September 1924 justifying Mitaev's arrest states that Mitaev was 36 when arrested, thus born in 1888 (RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 89, ll. 116–21 ob., here l. 116). In his biography of Mitaev, Zaurbekov indicates 1887 as Mitaev's birth year, drawing on statements from persons close to him and his family: M. D. Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev: Patriot, mirotvorets, politik, genii. Etalon spravedlivosti i chesti* (Groznyi: Zori Islama, 2008), 48.

⁷⁸ The Chechen historian Musa Geshaev claims Mitaev was “proficient” in Chechen, Arabic, and Russian, and that he was a distinguished expert in philosophy, religion, history, and politics (*Znamenitye chechentsy: Istoricheskie ocherki*, 4 vols. [Moscow: Musaizdat, 2005], 2: 500. Contemporary observers disagree: Mikoian wrote on several occasions that Mitaev spoke little or no Russian (RGASPI f. 84, op. 3, d. 117, l. 42; Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” 53). Budennyi concurs, stating in his memoirs that they required the services of a translator (presumably El'darkhanov) during the talks with Mitaev in Urus-Martan (*Proidennyi put'*, 311). The Communist Aleksandr Shliapnikov confirmed that Mitaev spoke Chechen but makes no mention of Russian (“Za khlebom i neft'iu,” *Voprosy istorii*, no. 12 [2002]: 94–119, here 106).

⁷⁹ Kozlov et al., *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast'*, 243–44; Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev*, 15, 26–27, 38. Bamat Girei Khadzhi was married to three women, owned a large amount of real estate and a textile manufactory, which the officials estimated to be worth 8,000 rubles (report commissioned by the tsarist administration of the Terek region, 10 February 1912, GARF f. 102, op. 146, d. 635–2, ll. 91–93).

bandit Abrek Zelimkhan, exiled him and six other Chechen sheikhs to inner Russia.⁸⁰ When Bamat Girei Khadzhi died in exile in Kaluga in 1914, his firstborn son, Ali, took over his role.⁸¹ Ali not only inherited his father's murids but apparently reinvigorated his followers.⁸² In his district, he appeared as a patron of education by having a school built in his hometown of Avtury in 1913.⁸³ It was in the parts of Chechnya where Mitaev wielded most influence (mostly in the Shali and Vedeno districts) that people regarded him as a benefactor who "paid out of his own pocket for schools to be built in the villages" and constructed "bridges for passage and journey" to "help the poor and backward citizens."⁸⁴

In his youth, Ali witnessed the repressive policy of Cossack rule. According to the autobiographical records that he is alleged to have written in prison from 1924 to 1925, he was an eyewitness to a massacre of Chechens in Gudermes in 1909 committed by Lieutenant General Verbitskii and his Cossacks.⁸⁵ It was his father's deportation in 1912, however, which must have left the deepest impression and shaped his negative view of tsarist rule. After the overthrow of the tsarist regime, Mitaev would refer to this event in public speeches.⁸⁶ He also brought it up during his discussions with the Soviet delegates in Urus-Martan.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev*, 25–26.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 38, 89.

⁸² Aleksei Kosterin reported that Ali Mitaev's followers numbered some 10,000 ("Po Chechne [putevye nabroski]: U miuridov v gostiakh," in *Pereval* [Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924], 2:288–306, here 288. The same figure later reappeared in other sources.

⁸³ Arkhivnoe upravlenie Pravitel'stva Chechenskoi Respubliki (AUP ChR) f. 236, op. 1, d. 343, ll. 1–3.

⁸⁴ "Minutes of the Village Soviet of the Settlement Tsatsan-Iurt, 27 April 1925," AUP ChR f. r-1206, op. 1ks, d. 31, ll. 44–45, 44.

⁸⁵ Arkhiv KGB Chechenskoi Respubliki f. 4971, 2:268, quoted in Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev*, 50. The head of the Department of Scientific Research of the Chechen archive stated that Mitaev's notes were lost when the contents of the KGB archive—and of other archives as well—were destroyed during the wars of the 1990s (personal communication from A. I. Dukhaev, 5 March 2012). Zaurbekov's claims cannot, therefore, be verified. According to his own account, he was able to view the document before 1994, when the first Chechen War began (personal communication from M. D. Zaurbekov, 6 March 2012). His book remains the only source for Mitaev's alleged autobiography.

⁸⁶ Shliapnikov recalled that during the meeting of the peoples of the Terek region, organized by the Bolsheviks and held from 25 January to 2 February 1918 in Mozdok, Mitaev gave a speech saying that "his father had suffered for his beliefs and was heavily punished for it by the Russian government" ("Za khlebom i neft'iu," 110–11).

⁸⁷ During their negotiations, Mitaev allegedly complained about the behavior of the Soviet government and compared it to the treatment of his father by the tsarist regime (Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 53).

It was thus not surprising that during the Russian Civil War, the White generals, as representatives of the old regime, found in Mitaev a bitter enemy. While Soviet historiography generally tends to play down or conceal the role of the Muslim leaders, North Caucasian historians have sought to revise this perception as far as possible.⁸⁸ For example, Mitaev's biographer Maskhud Zaurbekov claims that Mitaev played a far more important role than those figures mentioned in Soviet historiography, such as the Communist Nikolai Gikalo (1897–1938), a Russian native of the Caucasus who was commander of the Red Army in the Terek region during the Civil War, or Aslanbek Sheripov (1897–1919), a member of the secular Chechen intelligentsia whom Soviet historiography has commonly portrayed as the "first Communist" of Chechnya.⁸⁹

However, the comparison between Mitaev and Gikalo drawn by Zaurbekov is problematic insofar as Mitaev's interests were always focused on local issues and aimed at defending the settlements he controlled in the areas where he was influential.⁹⁰ After Denikin's army arrived and full-fledged war broke out, Mitaev, like many other Chechen leaders, opposed Denikin in the areas he controlled, but he showed little interest in alliances that did not align with his local interests.⁹¹ In his home district, however, it was Mitaev who during the turmoil of the war embodied the power that provided a

⁸⁸ I. Razgon was the most prominent historian of the early Soviet period on the Civil War in the North Caucasus. He barely mentioned the role of religious figures, consistently maintaining that the "insurrection in the mountains of the Caucasus against Denikin was led by the Caucasus Regional Committee of the RKP(b)" ("Gikalovtsy," *Bor'ba klassov*, no. 6 [1936]: 45–56, here 52).

⁸⁹ O. M. Morozova, "Nikolai Fedorovich Gikalo," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 9 (2011): 37–57. On Sheripov, see Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev*, 49. See also the first edition of the Soviet encyclopedia of 1934: *Bol'shaia sovetskaiia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaiia entsiklopediia, 1934), 61:534. For an early Soviet biography on Sheripov, see Efrem Eshba, *Aslanbek Sheripov: Opyt kharakteristiki, lichnosti i deiatel'nosti A. Sheripova v sviazi s narodno-revolutsionnym dvizheniem v Chechme. K desiatiletiiu Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii*, 2nd rev. ed. (Groznyi: Serlo, 1929).

⁹⁰ In fact, as early as the spring of 1917, Mitaev was organizing armed units to fight banditry (Muzaev, *Soiuz gortsev*, 107).

⁹¹ Boris M. Kuznetsov, an officer of the former Russian Empire who was an opponent of the Bolsheviks, corroborates this view. He mentions Mitaev briefly when writing about the situation in the North Caucasus in 1918: "The only person who could have been of help in our struggle against the Bolsheviks was Ali Mitaev, a Chechen, who wielded considerable influence in Chechnya. However, the Chechens at this time were mostly occupied with their own affairs. They settled their accounts with the Terek Cossacks and plundered everybody whom they had not yet plundered" (1918 *god v Dagestane: Grazhdanskaia voina* [New York: Voennyi vestnik, 1959], 19).

“minimum of organization,” as stated in a report of the White forces on the situation in the North Caucasus from the beginning of 1919.⁹²

Ali Mitaev was an important political figure in Chechnya after the February 1917 Revolution. He was a member of the Chechen National Council elected in March 1917; he was open to new socialist ideas and close to similarly minded members of the council. These included the Russian-educated Tashtemir El'darkhanov, a teacher by training, who came from a wealthy Chechen family and was a member of the Muslim faction of the Terek region in the First and Second Dumas in 1906–7; Akhmad Mutushev (1879–1943), a lawyer and the first elected head of the Chechen National Council; and Abdul-Medzhid (Tapa) Chermoev (1882–1936/37), a Chechen who made a fortune in the Grozny oil business and became president of the Union of United Mountaineers of the North Caucasus and Dagestan and later the Mountain Republic.⁹³ Mitaev's receptiveness to socialist thought is confirmed by a contemporary eyewitness, Aleksandr Shliapnikov, who was sent by the Soviet government to the North Caucasus in 1918 in his capacity as commissar for labor. Shliapnikov portrays Mitaev, whom he encountered during the session of the peoples of the Terek region held from 25 January to 2 February 1918 in Mozdok, as a “convinced socialist” who held a “fiery speech” in favor of the revolutionary cause and was ready to stand up “with a whip in his hand” against those Chechen “fanatics” who wanted to do away with the Soviet delegates during the meeting.⁹⁴

Probably as early as the beginning of 1920, discord arose between Mitaev and Gikalo, then the most important representative of the Bolsheviks in Chechnya.⁹⁵ According to Zaurbekov, Mitaev had organized a large meeting of the Chechen people in Avtury at the end of March 1920 without informing Gikalo. This meeting, a normal event in Chechen political and social life, was viewed as a provocation by Gikalo. At another meeting convoked by the Bolsheviks in Grozny a few days later, Gikalo openly accused Mitaev of being a counterrevolutionary. In his book, Zaurbekov quotes letters in which Mitaev not only vehemently contradicts Gikalo's accusations and casts himself as a staunch supporter of Soviet power but also questions Gikalo's

⁹² Report, 24 January 1919, in *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast'*, 282–94, here 288.

⁹³ Isa Shaipov, *Tashtemir El'darkhanov* (Grozny: Checheno-ingushskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1960); Muzaev, *Soiuz gortsev*, 448–49; Timur Muzaev, “Tapa Čermoev,” *Nakhskii zhurnal “Tepar,”* 1 November 2007 (<https://archive.is/zw9ep>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁹⁴ Shliapnikov, “Za khlebom i neft'iu,” 108–11.

⁹⁵ In January 1920, Gikalo was appointed commander of the Terek group of the Red Army (Morozova, “Nikolai Fedorovich Gikalo,” 42).

performance in defending Chechnya during Denikin's rule in 1919.⁹⁶ The Chechen historian's evidence is shaky (often his citations lack specific archival references, or he refers to recollections of contemporary witnesses), yet his statements largely concur with the impressions that Voroshilov conveyed of his meeting with Mitaev in January 1923. Thus, according to Voroshilov, Mitaev himself asked the Bolshevik delegates to take steps as soon as possible to rehabilitate him completely. In doing so, he "swore to all prophets, that he had been defamed in the eyes of Soviet power," which might indicate a quarrel between himself and Gikalo.⁹⁷

In any case, after this rift in 1920, cooperation between Mitaev and the Bolsheviks broke down, a situation that must have been unsettling for the state security services, which feared that important political and religious leaders such as Ali Mitaev might pursue more than just local interests. This is clear from a letter sent to Stalin in early 1923 by a certain Gorodetskii, head of the Department for the Fight against Banditry within the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. It stated that Mitaev had organized another large meeting of about 1,000 people in September 1922. According to the correspondent, the basic theme discussed during the meeting was "Chechnya's secession [from Russia] and its orientation toward Turkey."⁹⁸ It is unclear whether this evaluation indeed reflected Mitaev's political agenda or rather the writer's fears. People like Mitaev must have been suspect in the eyes of outsiders if only for their Muslim beliefs. Since large gatherings of Chechens were often accompanied by mass prayers in the form of the *zikr*, which included loud singing and rhythmic dancing, they were often deemed compelling evidence of the Chechens' fanatical mindset or pan-Islamic orientation, or even of preparations for *ghazawat*, a holy war against infidels.⁹⁹

The mere fact that people like Mitaev could carry out mass demonstrations unhindered by the Soviet government must itself have unsettled the Bolsheviks. Subsequently, Mitaev increasingly came into the sights of the secret police, who began to observe him as early as December 1922 under the code name "Tikhii" (quiet). Apparently, the secret investigation of

⁹⁶ Zaurbekov, *Sheikh Ali Mitaev*, 70–76. New research indicates that the Bolsheviks only played a minor role during 1919, when Denikin's Army of Volunteers dominated the North Caucasus. Yet Mitaev's praise of Chechen resistance also needs to be treated with some care. After the Chechens suffered severe losses against Denikin's troops, many changed sides and allied with the Whites (Morozova, "Nikolai Fedorovich Gikalo," 40–41).

⁹⁷ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 95.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Bugai, *Narody i vlast'*, 68–69.

⁹⁹ On this subject, see Sergei Mironov, head of the Eastern Department of the North Caucasus GPU, "Report" [before 21 April 1923], RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 588, ll. 33–34.

Mitaev was opened in response to a note by the military commissioner of the 28th Mountain Division, a certain Zhivin, who claimed that Mitaev was the “leader of the sharia and the sharia movement” in Chechnya and the “richest, most authoritarian, and most popular of all Chechens.”¹⁰⁰ When Mitaev became a member of the revkom, the local branch of the secret police was naturally displeased. It should come as no surprise that the members of this organization later did everything in their power to bring about Mitaev’s downfall.

Under Observation by the Secret Police

Around 21 April 1923, shortly after Mitaev’s official appointment to the Chechen revkom, a report from Sergei Mironov reached the Southeastern Bureau of the GPU in Rostov-on-Don. Mironov was the head of the GPU’s Eastern Department. Contrary to Voroshilov’s unequivocal statement in his letter to Stalin—that it was illusory to believe the situation in Chechnya could be improved without the help of the clergy—Mironov argued that the clergy must be sidelined. The “anarchy,” the “increase of banditry and religious zeal” that he claimed to have observed in Chechnya could be fought successfully only by a determined effort to weaken sharia and its followers.¹⁰¹ To win over the impoverished peasant classes in the mountain areas, land should be allocated to them, he argued. All these measures should be implemented not by the current Chechen government but by the Communist Party, which Mironov suggested should be built around a vaguely defined “small group of national Communists” who were to replace El’darkhanov and his close associates as soon as possible.¹⁰²

Mironov did not provide concrete names as to who exactly was to replace El’darkhanov. Yet after the suppression of Gotsinskii’s rebellion, Mironov must have felt confident enough to push for radical change, to remove any figures or groups he considered a potential danger to the establishment of Soviet power. He alluded to such a thing, at least, in his report, where he sought to achieve maximum effect: “Peace in the entire Caucasus depends on peace in Chechnya, and the increase in religiosity observed by us ... is extremely dangerous and indicates a tendency, vindicated by history, that any armed rising of the mountain peoples is preceded by a strong surge of religious fervor.”¹⁰³ Ali Mitaev epitomized this negatively perceived situation. Mironov claimed that Mitaev had joined forces with sheikhs Gotsinskii, Emin

¹⁰⁰ RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, l. 26.

¹⁰¹ “Report” [before 21 April 1923], ll. 33–34.

¹⁰² Ibid., l. 33 ob.

¹⁰³ Ibid., l. 34.

Ansaltinskii, and Bilo Khadzhi to form a kind of “higher sharia council,” which aimed at nothing less than the preparation of a “holy war” against Soviet power.¹⁰⁴

The report achieved its desired effect. On the same day that Mironov's letter reached Rostov-on-Don, the person in charge, Iakob Peters, forwarded the letter to the Central Committee, attention Stalin.¹⁰⁵ Under the supervision of Mironov and Efim Evdokimov, the authorized representative (*polnomochnyi predstavitel'*) of the GPU in the North Caucasus, the secret police scrupulously pursued its prosecution of Ali Mitaev and compiled report after report addressed to the regional party headquarters in Rostov-on-Don. In doing so, the secret police did not limit itself to general accusations but took great pains to substantiate these with detailed information. After all, arguing for Mitaev's exclusion meant going against the decision just taken by the Southeastern Bureau and approved by Moscow.

Mironov and his team essentially followed two lines of argument. On the one hand, they sought to prove that Mitaev's appointment to the revkom had been a mistake, since it had failed to stabilize the situation. One GPU report refers to “40 cases of bandit attacks on industrial compounds, the railroad, and members of the Red Army,” with all these attacks ostensibly “political in nature.”¹⁰⁶ Later, the secret police even claimed that Mitaev's murids themselves had taken part in the attacks.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, the secret police tried to prove that Mitaev was organizing a rebellion against Soviet power and was in contact with other counterrevolutionary forces. The reports mention Gotsinskii, whom Mitaev was supposed to have met in person “on 9 or 10 March 1923.”¹⁰⁸ They also note ties to Georgian Prince Kakutsa Chelokaev (or Cholokashvili, 1888–1930), a former colonel in the tsarist army who operated with his group of rebels near the border with Chechnya. Furthermore, the secret police claimed that Mitaev maintained relations with General Rogoshin, the leader of a group of Cossack rebels, as well as with followers of the pan-Islamic party Ittihad Islam (Islam United), alongside Turkish and other foreign agents. In all these schemes, the secret police officers claimed, Mitaev was only waiting for the right moment, when the “external

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., I. 33.

¹⁰⁵ Stalin's reaction to this letter is not recorded (Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 113 n. 6).

¹⁰⁶ N. M. Peremyshlennikova and G. N. Sevost'ianov, eds., “*Sovershenno sekretno*”: *Lubianka–Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934)*, 1, pt. 2: 1922–1923 (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2001), 973.

¹⁰⁷ RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, ll. 13–17.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., I. 26.

front" against the USSR had been formed, to strike.¹⁰⁹ Regarding the allegedly close ties between Mitaev and Gotsinskii, Mironov and Evdokimov tried to offer proof in the form of supposedly original copies of their correspondence, mentioning mutual support and supplies of weapons.¹¹⁰

What corroborating evidence did third parties offer? The charges of ambushes on the railroad and industrial compounds certainly appear to have been exaggerated. In his memoirs, Mikoian himself admitted that Mitaev's appointment to the revkom brought about a "certain pacification" of Chechnya.¹¹¹ This is confirmed by other parties directly involved. For example, R. N. Sokolov, representative of the military commissioner's office in Chechnya, stated in one of his reports in July 1923 that the situation had improved considerably and "banditry had decreased to a minimum" after Mitaev's integration into the revkom.¹¹² The native Georgian secretary of the Chechen division of the Orgburo, Asnarashvili, concurred with the assessment that after Mitaev's appointment, assaults on railroads were "quickly liquidated."¹¹³

While Sokolov did not mention the alleged ties between Mitaev and Gotsinskii at all, Asnarashvili described them in great detail. He must have read Mironov's report, because in his letter he agreed with him about the severe danger of a possible union of "these two forces, the plains and the mountains." He conceded that Mitaev was a "most correct and faultless" person, who primarily fulfilled his "duties toward the state." For example, he had delivered the "full amount of tax in kind five months ago." Asnarashvili claimed that the picture of the "outwardly honest citizen" was deceptive, however, because Mitaev was "slippery as a snake," trying to use his new position in the revkom to increase his influence and to make El'darkhanov dependent on him.¹¹⁴ In this latter aim, Sokolov asserted, Mitaev had largely succeeded. While Mitaev—under constant observation by the secret police—reportedly acted carefully and had supposedly even succeeded in persuading Gotsinskii to temporarily leave Chechnya, Asnarashvili did not believe Mitaev had dissociated himself from

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., ll. 26–33; Peremyshlennikova and Sevost'ianov, "*Sovershenno sekretno*," 1, pt. 2:973, 979; N. M. Peremyshlennikova and G. N. Sevost'ianov et al., eds., "*Sovershenno sekretno*": *Lubianka–Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934)*, 2: 1924 (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2001), 33.

¹¹⁰ Russian translations of these letters from Arabic can be found in RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, ll. 18–19.

¹¹¹ Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 54.

¹¹² Sokolov, "Report on Chechnya" [before 20 July 1923], in *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast'*, 133–35, here 134.

¹¹³ Asnarashvili to Mikoian, ca. 22 October 1923, RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 538, ll. 59–65, here l. 62.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., l. 63.

Gotsinskii. Such dissociation was, according to Asnarashvili, disproven not only by the frequent visits by Gotsinskii's followers to Mitaev, but also by the fact that Mitaev, like his father before him, was a follower of pan-Islamic ideas, which Gotsinskii fundamentally shared.¹¹⁵ Sokolov and Asnarashvili agreed with Mironov insofar as both called for Mitaev's removal. Unlike Mironov, however, they advocated a different approach: strengthening El'darkhanov and the Chechen revkom.¹¹⁶ Until a new generation of "Chechen intelligentsia" had been educated in Soviet schools, Asnarashvili argued, it was imperative to support El'darkhanov, to whom for the moment there was no alternative, and to redirect him to his "former course."¹¹⁷

It is impossible to determine whether Mitaev was actually cultivating contacts with anti-Soviet rebel groups and how close these may have been. Concerning his relationship with Gotsinskii, he was probably careful enough to avoid direct contact, knowing that he was watched closely by the state's security organs. Asnarashvili was not alone in claiming that Gotsinskii might have resided outside Chechnya, perhaps in Azerbaijan, from the summer of 1923 at the latest.¹¹⁸ At the same time, one cannot exclude the possibility that Mitaev met with persons close to Gotsinskii or other groups hostile to Soviet power. Later, during interrogation in prison, Mitaev categorically denied any contacts with Georgian rebel leaders.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, Georgian sources report that such contact did take place during the summer of 1923.¹²⁰

If Mitaev indeed received guests who were openly opposed to the Bolsheviks, then this could be an indication that he was hedging his bets. Aware of the fragility of his ties with the Soviet state and its security organs, he may have felt it best to cultivate relations with other parties who

¹¹⁵ Ibid., I. 64.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., II. 13–14, 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., II. 63–64.

¹¹⁸ Bol'shakov, secretary of Grozny's RCP(b) committee, closed letter (*zakrytoe pis'mo*) to his comrades (with a copy to Lazar' Kaganovich, then head of the organizational department of the secretary of the CC), 25 July 1923, RGASPI f. 17, op. 67, d. 63, II. 32–36, here II. 34–35.

¹¹⁹ North Caucasus prosecutors' decision on the Mitaev case, 24 September 1924, RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 89, II. 116–21 ob., here 119.

¹²⁰ N. G. Dzhevakhishvili, "Bor'ba za svobodu Kavkaza: Iz istorii voenno-politicheskogo sotrudnichestva gruzin i severokavkaztsev v pervoi polovine XX veka," *Prometheus*, no. 8 (2011): 35–49, here 47–49 (<http://chechen.org/archives/158>, accessed 10 June 2013); Dzhevakhishvili, "Bor'ba za svobodu Kavkaza: Iz istorii voenno-politicheskogo sotrudnichestva gruzin i severokavkaztsev v pervoi polovine XX veka. Okonchanie," *Prometheus*, no. 9 (2011) (<http://chechen.org/archives/162>, accessed 10 June 2013). Dzhevakhishvili quotes sources from Arkhiv Prezidenta Gruzii f. 14, op. 2, d. 28, II. 25–26, draws on published contemporary documents (notably *Delo Paritetnogo komiteta antisovetskikh partii Gruzii [obvinitel'noe zakliuchenie]* [Tbilisi, 1925]), and the published memoirs of persons directly involved on the Chechen side.

might support him in case of a threat. The notion that Mitaev was actively pursuing plans for a rebellion, meanwhile, seems rather far-fetched. Mitaev's membership in the revkom was helpful insofar as he could strengthen his influence in his territories and thus advance his goal of establishing law and order there. In fact, Mitaev had rather bluntly told the Soviet delegates during their meeting in Urus-Martan that he would join the revkom only if he was allowed to both keep his influence in his area and maintain his entourage of loyal supporters.¹²¹ Against this backdrop, it is difficult to see how he could have had an interest in threatening this position.

Mitaev's Arrest and the Beginnings of the Power Struggle

In the Bolshevik worldview, people such as Mitaev could ultimately only be seen as enemies scheduled for elimination sooner or later, especially if they commanded their own power bases. Moreover, members of the government security organs had an institutional interest in presenting the situation as more threatening than it really was. The better the results, expressed in the number of people arrested and sentenced per month, the more essential the agency appeared in the eyes of the state.

But even for the North Caucasus branch of the secret police—which was mostly composed of hardened Bolsheviks, veterans of the Russian Civil War—it was not easy to bring down as significant a personality as Ali Mitaev. At the beginning of the 1920s, members of the secret police were reluctant to go into the Chechen countryside. Even in Grozny, it was difficult to arrest Mitaev, since an armed retinue always escorted him to the revkom meetings.¹²²

Mitaev was alert to the possibility of being arrested by the secret police. For example, on 16 April 1924, when he was in Grozny for a meeting of the Chechen revkom and picked up a rumor that the secret police was trying to arrest him, he left the town that night to escape detention. Since Mitaev refused to return to Grozny afterwards, the Chechen division of the Orgburo, the extended arm of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, ordered the head of the Chechen government, El'darkhanov, to do everything he could to persuade Mitaev to return. El'darkhanov knew that Mitaev could be enticed to make such a move only if he received assurances of safe conduct. Therefore, El'darkhanov issued a letter promising Mitaev immunity and sent it via his brother, Omar Mitaev. Thereupon Ali Mitaev did come to town on 18 April to attend the revkom meeting. The secretary of the Chechen Orgburo and the deputy representative of the local branch

¹²¹ Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 53.

¹²² Ibid., 54.

of the OGPU were also present at the meeting. Both assured him that a member of the executive committee could not be arrested, even as they accused him of cowardice and reproached him for not knowing his civil rights. Apparently, Mitaev was persuaded to come to the secret police headquarters under the pretext of needing to fill out a form. When he arrived in the company of the deputy head of the revkom, Zaurbek Sheripov (the brother of the famous Bolshevik Aslanbek Sheripov, who was killed in the Civil War), he was arrested and transferred to Rostov-on-Don the same day.

This description of events is based on a letter sent by El'darkhanov to the party's Central Committee, attention Stalin, on 20 May 1924.¹²³ El'darkhanov, who was apparently unaware of the secret police's plot to arrest Mitaev, asked Stalin for Mitaev's immediate release. El'darkhanov did not claim that Mitaev was guiltless, but neither did he consider Mitaev a danger. Despite Mitaev's "faults and confusions," El'darkhanov argued, he had been a supportive member of the revkom and had reliably guarded the railroad with his followers. Since Mitaev was very popular, his liquidation would only strengthen his status as a "martyr for religion." El'darkhanov even warned that intra-Chechen conflicts might break out, arguing that "according to local customs, a Chechen who [betrayed] another Chechen" would become the "subject of a blood feud by the victim's entire clan."¹²⁴

El'darkhanov found himself in a particularly precarious position. He was forced to defend Mitaev's appointment to the revkom, but at the same time, he could not afford to appear overly sympathetic to Mitaev. Nor did El'darkhanov dare be seen as dependent on Mitaev for security in the latter's territory, since that might give the Soviet leadership an excuse for open military intervention in Chechnya. Ultimately, however, El'darkhanov knew that his own fate was tied to that of Mitaev. Since Mitaev had come to town only because of El'darkhanov's letter, he was now under El'darkhanov's personal protection. If El'darkhanov did not secure Mitaev's release, the secret police's perfidious action threatened to discredit not only the revkom's reputation with the Chechens but his own as well, as he complained in the letter to Stalin.¹²⁵ It was thus hardly astonishing that El'darkhanov would move heaven and earth to secure Mitaev's release.

¹²³ El'darkhanov to Stalin, 20 May 1924, RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 538, ll. 66–67. Various documents give various dates for Mitaev's arrest. The North Caucasus prosecutors' decision on the Mitaev case, 24 September 1924, states that Mitaev was arrested on 26 April 1924 (RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 89, 116).

¹²⁴ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 538, l. 67.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 66 ob.

Moscow did not respond to El'darkhanov's request. The Central Committee passed the case on for examination to the Politburo, which forwarded the matter to the Orgburo on the grounds that its comrades were more familiar with the case.¹²⁶ On a meeting on 4 June 1924, the members of this institution decided to "refuse El'darkhanov's request concerning Ali Mitaev's release" and to leave the Mitaev case "in the jurisdiction of the OGPU."¹²⁷

Following Mitaev's arrest, the North Caucasus branch of the secret police tried to undermine El'darkhanov's position even more. In May 1924, a particularly negative report on the situation in Chechnya reached the Party's North Caucasus office in Rostov-on-Don. Its authors, Mironov and Evdokimov, sketched a picture of the Chechen revkom as marked by factional infighting, corruption inside the government, and excesses among its members. They charged that the money Chechnya received from the central government was being misapplied or even misused, leading to a budget deficit of 400,000 rubles.¹²⁸ In a second letter, Mironov went even farther, attacking El'darkhanov directly and accusing him of embezzling money for personal purposes, enriching his own clan.¹²⁹

El'darkhanov, however, did not admit defeat and took the initiative himself. He was particularly fierce in his rebuttal of the claim by the secret police that Gotsinskii and Mitaev had cultivated an active relationship and exchange of letters. To disprove this charge, he instigated an investigation in the framework of the revkom. According to various witnesses whose statements were taken for the record, the letter that Gotsinskii had sent to Mitaev, and in which he called for a rebellion against Soviet power, was a forgery. A certain Osman Nashaev, a known forger of documents, was stated to have fabricated the seal. A group including the Chechens Kusi Baigireev (a relative of Nashaev), Maslak Ushaev, and Magomet Vachigov from the village of Dyshni-Veden' was said to have masterminded the plot.¹³⁰ They had tried

¹²⁶ Gatagova et al., *TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 222 n. 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹²⁸ Mironov and Evdokimov to the North Caucasus office of the RCP(b), May 1924, RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 3–10, here l. 3.

¹²⁹ Evdokimov to Mironov, May 1924, RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, ll. 52–61, here l. 54.

¹³⁰ Maslak Ushaev (1897–1938) later worked for the secret police of the Chechen-Ingush AO and was appointed head of the Supreme Court in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. In contemporary Chechen historiography, he is a hated figure, appearing as a "Stalinist Chekist-sadist" in Andrei Zelev's online encyclopedia, "Znamenitye chechentsy i ingushi," Entsiklopediia T–Ia (<http://www.proza.ru/2009/02/15/185>, accessed 11 January 2013). See also the Internet blog on "Chechen traitors": "Traitor and Executioner of the Chechen people Maslak Ushaev" (http://chechentrailors.blogspot.ch/2011/10/blog-post_7000.html, accessed 22 February 2013). The Chechen writer Musa Beksultanov calls him an "atheist, informer, and murderer"

to create the impression that the letter from Gotsinskii had been intercepted by the group and later brought to Rostov-on-Don by Baigireev. According to witnesses, Baigireev received 15 *chervontsy* (Russian gold coins), which he shared with Maslak Ushaev. Apparently the group's scheming was revealed only because the third person involved, Magomet Vachigov, took offense after receiving only a small share of the money and started to tell people in the village about the plot.¹³¹

Simultaneously, El'darkhanov compiled numerous recorded statements and declarations by Chechen representatives, including from Mitaev's own Kunta-Khadzhi (Qadiriyya) brotherhood. The purpose of these minutes was to prove Mitaev's huge popular support. El'darkhanov also had copies of the documents sent to the Eastern Department of the Southern Bureau of the OGPU.¹³² In addition to this "proselytization among the population," as the secret police described El'darkhanov's activities, the Chechen head of government also gave the secret police agents an immediate taste of the agitation among the Chechens when they showed up for the first All-Chechen Congress of Soviets, which took place under El'darkhanov's chairmanship from 29 July to 2 August 1924 in Grozny.¹³³

At this meeting, which was attended by some 400 delegates, the revkom was officially abolished as a form of transitional government and replaced by a regularly elected regional executive committee (*oblastnyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet, oblispolkom*).¹³⁴ Furthermore, during this session a Chechen faction of the Russian Communist Party was founded with some 50 members.¹³⁵ Although not previously on the agenda, the case of Ali Mitaev became one of the major topics at the meeting. Numerous speakers demanded that both Mitaev brothers (the secret police had arrested Omar as well as Ali) be released from detention. Confronted with the Chechens' demands, Mikoian, the main speaker on the first day of the meeting, promised to communicate them to the responsible authorities. He also tried to calm the crowd by stating that the conditions of Mitaev's detention were much better than those of

(Beksultanow, *Der Weg zurück zum Anfang: Erzählungen, Novellen, Gedichte in Prosa*, trans. Marianne Herold and Ruslan Bazgiew [Klagenfurt: Kitab-Verlag, 2012], 138, 157 n. 5).

¹³¹ Report by Khakim Sataev, inhabitant of the village of Dyshni-Veden, 8 May 1924, RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, l. 39. More reports can be found in *ibid.*, ll. 44–45.

¹³² *Ibid.*, ll. 49–50.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, l. 60.

¹³⁴ Minutes, GARF f-1235, op. 102, d. 495, ll. 2–2 ob., 18–19. For an abbreviated summary of the four-day meeting, see Kozlov et al., *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast'*, 503–15.

¹³⁵ Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 55.

other prisoners. At the same time, he made it understood that the case was outside his area of jurisdiction, since the secret police had made the arrest.¹³⁶

Evdokimov also took part in the meeting in Groznyi and must have noted how strongly Mitaev's arrest had stirred up the population.¹³⁷ Regardless of his department's efforts, it seemed that the Mitaev case might even strengthen El'darkhanov's position. This very meeting may have convinced Evdokimov not only to remove El'darkhanov from power but to have Mitaev physically eliminated as well.¹³⁸ The secret police continued to collect incriminating material against Mitaev. By autumn, they had developed their charges to the point that in a letter from 28 November 1924, they could insist that shooting Ali Mitaev was an absolute necessity. The execution, they asserted, would deal a blow to the "reactionary sharia counterrevolution of the entire North Caucasus" and would stem the threat emanating from the "Mitaev sect."¹³⁹ However, representatives of the secret police also noted that if Mitaev were executed, acts of revenge against themselves and against El'darkhanov were likely to follow.¹⁴⁰

Accordingly, the secret police argued that the case should not be heard in open court, with confirmation by the North Caucasus public prosecutor's office (*prokuratura*). In fact, the public prosecutor also concluded that Mitaev's execution might lead not only to blood vengeance but to an increase in banditry. Therefore, a public trial of the case was not recommended.¹⁴¹ The Bolshevik party leadership must have agreed to this request, because the case did subsequently remain in the hands of the secret police. The members of its highest committee, the OGPU-Collegium in Moscow, however, initially refused the request of their colleagues in the North Caucasus. On 19 January 1925, they sentenced Ali Mitaev to ten years' detention. It was probably shortly thereafter that Mitaev was transferred from Rostov-on-Don to a jail in Moscow.¹⁴²

The documents do not clarify why Mitaev was left alive. Maybe the fear of acts of revenge by his followers discouraged the secret police from taking this step. If we believe the explanations in a report by the Bolshevik writer Aleksei Kosterin, who visited Ali Mitaev's birthplace, Avtury, at the beginning

¹³⁶ For a summary of Mikoian's speech, see Kozlov et al., *Vainakhi i imperskaia vlast'*, 505–6; and Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 56.

¹³⁷ Mironov appears on the members' list in the minutes of the meeting (GARF f-1235, op. 102, d. 495, l. 2 ob.),

¹³⁸ RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, l. 52.

¹³⁹ Ibid., d. 89, ll. 114–25.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 114.

¹⁴¹ North Caucasus Prosecutor's Office, 2–3 December 1924, *ibid.*, l. 115.

¹⁴² Peremyshlennikova and Sevost'ianov, "Sovershenno sekretno," 1, pt. 2:1026.

of July 1924, tensions ran high among the local population. The murids with whom Kosterin talked were ready to take revenge if Mitaev was killed. They were honor bound to do so by their oath of allegiance to Mitaev.¹⁴³

During this time, petitions were signed at village assemblies in numerous Chechen settlements for the brothers' liberation or reduction of their sentences. Apart from one that was addressed to Mikoian directly and signed by the wives of the Mitaev brothers, these petitions were issued in the form of resolutions by the respective village councils or presented as the minutes of the village council meetings, accredited with a seal of the secretary of the Chechen government.¹⁴⁴ Because all these documents were written during the same period of time, between 22 and 28 April 1925, and because these petitions show a great similarity in wording (up to literal repetitions of whole paragraphs), it can be assumed that the whole activity was centrally coordinated and orchestrated. The only possible instigator of such large-scale activity was the Chechen government under El'darkhanov. Documents to this effect are available for 16 settlements in the districts of Vedenov, Shali, Urus-Martan, and Novo-Chechenskii, which points to Mitaev's popularity among the population.¹⁴⁵

Disarming Chechnya

On the whole, the situation in Chechnya was strained in the months after Mitaev's arrest, but not quite as dramatically as the reports by the secret police would have us believe. For instance, the assaults on the railroad, after increasing initially, noticeably decreased again from the second half of 1924 on—apparently after Mikoian, who had traveled to Chechnya for this specific purpose, had again tasked an armed Chechen unit led by a “former leader of a band” with guarding the railroad.¹⁴⁶ The fight against banditry in general, too, reportedly made great progress. According to Mikoian, up to “500 bandits” had been arrested, and many bandit leaders had surrendered.¹⁴⁷ In an unpublished dictation (*diktovka*) of August 1971, Mikoian announced his belief that Feliks Dzerzhinskii and other leading figures in the Cheka had

¹⁴³ Kosterin, “Po Chechne,” 292.

¹⁴⁴ For the petition addressed to Mikoian, see AUP ChR f. r-1206, op. 1ks, d. 31, ll. 32–33.

¹⁴⁵ Specifically, Goity, Staro-Sunzhenskii, Berdykel'skoe, Urus-Martan, Gekhi, Alkhan-Iurt, Shali, Mesker-Iurt, Ustar-Gordoi, Avtury, Bel'gatskii, Chechen-Aul, Novye Atagi, Kuraly, Tsatsan-Iurt, and one other settlement (name unknown) (*ibid.*, ll. 21–62).

¹⁴⁶ Mikoian, “Iz vospominanii,” 55.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

exaggerated the danger of assaults on trains in Chechnya: "Because at this point, they stopped."¹⁴⁸

One reason why the secret police may have been unwilling to adjust its negative view of Chechnya in any way was that in the meantime the notion of conducting a large disarmament campaign in Chechnya had taken hold of the Soviet leaders.¹⁴⁹ The Bolsheviks conducted disarmament operations as early as the spring of 1924 in reaction to disturbances during elections to the soviets.¹⁵⁰ The major disarmament campaign, however, was carried out only in the late summer of 1925. Altogether, about 7,000 men, including Red Army troops and armed OGPU units, took part in the operation, which started on 23 or 25 August 1925. Their procedure was uniform: they surrounded the settlement in question and called on the inhabitants to surrender their weapons. If the people did not follow the order, the army had the villages shelled, including by airplanes and using heavy artillery in some cases. According to a report by the army staff of the North Caucasus region, 25,299 guns, 4,319 revolvers, 1 machine gun, and about 80,000 rounds of ammunition were confiscated during the two-week operation.¹⁵¹ Although the Chechens managed to hide some of their weapons and ammunition, the army probably succeeded in confiscating most of the Chechen arsenal in the course of the operation.¹⁵²

A key aim of the operation was to arrest leading members of rebel bands. At the beginning of September, an army unit discovered Gotsinskii in the area of Sharoevskii and called on the local population to surrender him. To apply pressure, the soldiers apparently took 40 elders hostage. When the population did not comply with the demand, the army had the settlements shelled for two days. Only then, on 5 September 1924, did Gotsinskii surrender, apparently a broken and critically ill man.¹⁵³ The extent of Gotsinskii's authority became obvious on the journey to Groznyi, when according to Mikoian's unpublished memoirs the "Chechen religious population" threw itself at his feet and kissed his clothes.¹⁵⁴ This was probably one reason why Gotsinskii was transferred to Rostov-on-Don

¹⁴⁸ RGASPI f. 84, op. 3, d. 120, l. 80. These dictated passages served as drafts for the memoirs he published later. See Mikoian, *Tak bylo*, 232.

¹⁴⁹ Mikoian, unpublished notes, August 1971, RGASPI f. 84, op. 3, d. 120, ll. 80–81.

¹⁵⁰ Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, 171.

¹⁵¹ GARF f. r-1235, op. 140, d. 1132, l. 8 ob.

¹⁵² Pavel Aptekar', "Vtoroe pokorenie Kavkaza: Bol'sheviki i chechenskie povstantsy," *Rodina*, no. 6 (1995): 43–48; A. Iu. Lashkov, "1925 god: Spetsoperatsiia Krasnoi Armii. Tri chetverti veka nazad pravitel'stvennye voiska uzhe priobretali opyt likvidatsii chechenskikh bandformirovani," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 21 April 2000 (http://nvo.ng.ru/history/2000-04-21/5_sp_ops.html, accessed 9 January 2013).

¹⁵³ Lashkov, "1925 god."

¹⁵⁴ RGASPI f. 84, op. 3, d. 171, l. 37.

immediately and sentenced to death by decree of the OGPU of the North Caucasus Region as early as 15 October 1925. His 16-year-old son, two of his daughters, and other family members were executed together with him.¹⁵⁵ In addition to Gotsinskii, other prominent political and religious leaders were executed in the course of the operation.¹⁵⁶

The military intervention was not considered an act of punishment, so the losses were kept within limits. The army command's report listed only five dead and nine wounded members of the Red Army and the secret police. Six civilians were listed as killed and 30 as wounded by artillery fire. Twelve rebels were killed and 300 persons arrested, of whom 105 were subsequently shot.¹⁵⁷ The secret police offered higher numbers in its report, recording 800 persons arrested, of whom 115 were shot (as of 12 October 1924).¹⁵⁸ Five members of the secret police, among them Mironov, received the prestigious Order of the Red Banner (*Orden Krasnogo Znameni*) for their achievements in arresting Gotsinskii and other "counterrevolutionaries" during the disarmament campaign.¹⁵⁹

Since the danger of an armed rebellion appeared to have been averted at this point, the representatives of the secret police saw the option of physically eliminating Mitaev in a different light. Based on new charges submitted by the headquarters of the OGPU to their colleagues in Moscow, the OGPU-Collegium rescinded its former resolution. On 26 October 1925, it decided to have Ali Mitaev shot.¹⁶⁰

During the disarmament campaign and liquidation of rebel leaders, the Chechen government experienced political upheavals. Not only was El'darkhanov deposed from office on 27 September 1925, but two other representatives of the government, Zaurbek Sheripov and Abas Gaisumov, were forced to step down, suggesting that the Soviet party leadership was determined to make a fresh start in Chechnya.¹⁶¹ Chechen Communist Daud Arsanukaev was appointed chairman of the Chechen regional government, which he had served as a member up until this point.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁵ Donogo, "Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii," 54.

¹⁵⁶ GARF f. r-1235, op. 140, d. 1132, l. 8 ob.; Lashkov, "1925 god."

¹⁵⁷ Pavel Aptekar', "Voina bez kraia i kontsa," *Rodina*, no. 1–2 (2000): 161–65, here 163; Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, 172–73.

¹⁵⁸ RGASPI f. 78, op. 7, d. 54, ll. 3–4.

¹⁵⁹ GARF f. r-1235, op. 140, d. 1132, l. 3. See also A. Avtorkhanov, *Memuary* (Frankfurt am Main: Posev-Verlag, 1983), 314.

¹⁶⁰ The exact date of the execution is unknown (Peremyshlennikova and Sevost'ianov, "*Sovershenno sekretno*," 1, pt. 2:1026.

¹⁶¹ RGASPI f. 78, op. 7, d. 54, l. 4.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Bolshevik Policy in the Muslim Periphery

Mikoian refers to the co-optation of Ali Mitaev in his memoirs as an experiment, which was ultimately unsuccessful because Mitaev remained essentially "hostile to Soviet power" and played a "double game."¹⁶³ To be sure, the experiment failed not because of Mitaev's allegedly anti-Soviet activities, but because the Bolsheviks never seriously intended to share power with such people in the first place. In fact, it was precisely during Mitaev's appointment as a member of the revkom that overall Soviet policy started to shift and became markedly less flexible regarding cooperation with Muslims.

The Red Army managed to put down the Gotsinskii rebellion in the North Caucasus by the spring of 1921, and the Basmachi armed insurrection by mid-1922. No third force would later seriously threaten the Bolsheviks' hold on power, even if it remained fragile. To Evdokimov, Mironov, and their ilk, it must have seemed odd that Bolsheviks sought the cooperation of a Chechen religious leader at the very time when their grip on power was stronger than ever before. In fact, the Bolshevik leadership itself signaled in May 1923 that it would take a tougher line when it arrested the well-known Tatar Communist Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, one of the most outspoken representatives of coexistence between socialism and Islam and a supporter of a united Turkestan.¹⁶⁴ Possibly spurred by this arrest, Moscow also sought to weaken the strong clerical establishment in Central Asia, with the Central Asia Bureau of the Communist Party initiating extensive purges of party and state organizations in Bukhara.¹⁶⁵

The actions of the local branches of the secret police in the North Caucasus, crude as they may have seemed, were thus ultimately in line with the overall strategy to cement the Bolsheviks' hold on power by purging government and party structures of "undesirable elements." Dissent regarding Mitaev's inclusion into the revkom, which arose between the representatives of the Southeastern Bureau and the North Caucasus branch of the secret police, was always over tactics, not strategy.

Precarious, in this respect, was the position of indigenous national Communists, often caught between the fronts. Ultimately, El'darkhanov fell not because some of the leading Bolsheviks in the North Caucasus region viewed him with suspicion and at times even despised him but because of

¹⁶³ Mikoian, "Iz vospominanii," 54.

¹⁶⁴ Sultan-Galiev (1892–1940) played a crucial role during the revolution and the war in the Volga and Central Asian regions and was politically important in the early 1920s (R. G. Landa, "Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 8 [1999]: 53–70).

¹⁶⁵ Out of the 202 Bukharan Communist Party members purged, 12.4 percent were clergy. See Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 74.

his entanglement with the Mitaev case. Instead of clearly distancing himself from Mitaev after the latter's arrest, El'darkhanov tried to mobilize Chechen society to support his concerns. He seems to have been only moderately successful, however, as numerous Chechen Islamic authorities, especially in the mountain regions, never regarded themselves as followers of Mitaev (or, consequently, of El'darkhanov) and reportedly even offered the Soviet authorities their active armed support against these "counterrevolutionary" forces.¹⁶⁶

In spite of the drama surrounding the case of Mitaev and the subsequent political upheaval, the intervention of the Bolsheviks in Chechnya remained selective. The removal of El'darkhanov in the mid-1920s did not yet mark the beginning of mass arrests and executions of national Communists. Those would characterize a later time, during the Stalinist purges of 1937–38, when a whole generation of Russian and non-Russian communist leaders was wiped out. In this respect, it is significant that El'darkhanov, after his removal from power, was not arrested but received a new administrative post in the newly formed Committee of the Communist Party of the North Caucasus Region (Kavkraikom) in Rostov-on-Don. In 1929, he returned to Grozny to take on an executive position at Grozneft'. On 14 November 1934, El'darkhanov died after a short illness.¹⁶⁷

I would also note that the disarmament campaign of 1925, heavy-handed though it was, was an operation with clearly defined military and political aims, not a prelude to "genocide," an attempt to carry out the concerted and systematic annihilation of the Chechen people and its heritage, as some Chechen (and Western) historians claim.¹⁶⁸ Disarmament campaigns were not confined to Chechnya. Similar operations had been carried out in other places, such as Karachai-Cherkessia in 1921–22 or areas of Azerbaijan in 1923–26.¹⁶⁹ After the military action in Chechnya, disarmament drives were also carried out in North Ossetia and Ingushetia in the autumn of 1925 and in Dagestan in September 1926.¹⁷⁰ It was only toward the end of the 1920s,

¹⁶⁶ Evdokimov to Mironov, May 1924, RGASPI f. 65, op. 1, d. 142, ll. 60–61. The fact that Mitaev never wielded much influence in the more difficult-to-access mountain areas is recorded in various sources, e.g., Voroshilov to Stalin, 14 November 1923, RGASPI f. 74, op. 2, d. 81, l. 135.

¹⁶⁷ Shaipov, *Tashtemir El'darkhanov*, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Dzh. Dzh. Gakaev, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Chechni (XX vek)*, 2 pts. (Moscow: ChKTs, 1997), 91. "Soviet Genocide" is the title of chap. 2 (which deals with the early Soviet period) in Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, 40–84.

¹⁶⁹ On Karachai-Cherkessia, see Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, 173. On Azerbaijan, see Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall*, 533.

¹⁷⁰ Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule*, 173–74; "Chechnia: Vooruzhennaia bor'ba v 20–30-e gody," *Voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 2 (1997): 132–35.

together with their collectivization campaign, that the Bolsheviks started their all-out onslaught on religion and tradition—officially prohibiting sharia and *adat* courts, shutting down numerous Islamic schools and mosques, and nationalizing *waqf*. The attack continued in the 1930s as thousands of members of the Muslim clergy throughout the USSR were exiled, imprisoned, or shot.¹⁷¹

The intervention of the Bolsheviks in the political affairs of Chechnya, along with the disarmament campaign of the mid-1920s, did not yet mark a reversal of Soviet nationality policy, but it did demonstrate the limits of the freedom that the Bolsheviks had solemnly promised the Chechens and other non-Russian peoples as part of their autonomy in the early 1920s.

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¹⁷¹ Bobrovnikov, "Waqf Endowments in Daghestani Village Communities," 483–84, 496.